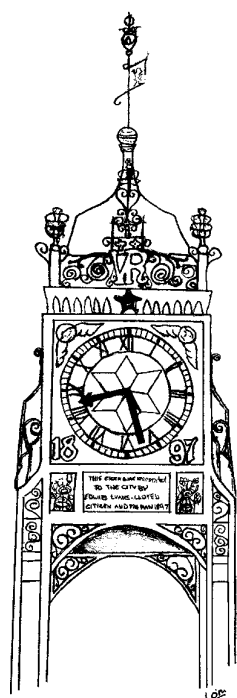


## Chester chronicles

### Baby on board



EASTGATE CLOCK, CHESTER

There we were, on a dark winter's evening, heading for a six hour sea crossing from Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire, on the old reliable iron car ferry. Sure, we had booked the new super duper fast shuttle speedy thing called *The Swift* but, apparently, these new vessels can't really sail all that well if there happens to be a puff of wind on the Irish Sea, so inevitably, they are often cancelled. Indeed, the first one that was built and sent to Holyhead was nicknamed by the locals, "The Eternal Flame," because it never went out! Now they do go out, but the new term "Vomit Comet" has alarming portent.

Anyway, there I am, the wife, four kids, and a dog, just finished breakfast at 5 am, an hour and a half out of Holyhead, when I hear over the tannoy system, "Is there a doctor or nurse on the ship?" I, of course, discreetly sank further into my seat, pretending not to notice, but the kids were having none of it! It was "Dad, Dad, you're a doctor—they're looking for a doctor. Dad, go on, you go. My Dad's a doctor you know!" People had noticed. I therefore slunk off in the direction of the information desk, making detours through packed bars, full of revellers, before finally arriving at the desk. Just then, an African woman went whizzing past in a wheelchair. She looked about 18 months pregnant, and it was pretty obvious she was in labour.

Up we go to this massive first aid room, with a good bed and loads of cupboards. I proceeded to open and look in all the cupboards, searching for inspiration and playing for time. In my denim shirt and jeans, I certainly didn't look like a doctor, and I began to suspect that the assembled gallery were also beginning to have their doubts. Luckily, I found a blood pressure cuff, and took her blood pressure, and this impressed all and sundry. The African woman was from Togo and could speak only French. My schoolboy French of "Two beers and a sandwich please" didn't really seem appropriate, but I did try "ne poussez pas s'il vous plait," in the hope that she might keep this baby in until we got to Dun Laoghaire. Luckily, another doctor emerged, a young African called Dr Kese. He was on his way to Trinity College in Dublin to do a diploma in obstetrics and gynaecology. It was a

great pity he wasn't on his way *back* from Trinity College, having done his diploma. However, between the pair of us, and the mum herself, of course, a lovely little African baby was delivered. While Dr Kese was dealing with the placenta, I had the baby by the ankles, hoping he would finally start to breathe, as both the baby and myself went blue. I patted him on the back like I had seen being done on television, and he eventually took a big breath and screamed the ship down. What a huge relief!

Incidentally, as the baby was just being delivered, it suddenly came to me that they should have asked for a midwife, rather than a doctor or nurse. I asked the stewardess to go and ask for one over the tannoy system. Of course, when my wife heard the announcement, for a midwife, her immediate reaction was "What the hell is he doing in there? What does he know about delivering babies? I should be up there." It transpired that there was a whole gang of midwives from Wigan down in the bar, travelling with an Irish folk group but, sure, it was all over by then.

Never one to miss a photo opportunity, I had a disposable Kodak camera with me, and took some pictures which, of course, were a complete disaster. However, it is amazing what medical illustration can do with the negatives, and they were able to airbrush the picture, which turned out to be quite passable.

At that time, *Hospital Doctor* was running stuff about doctors in aeroplanes, and I sent them the picture; it got published in November '99. That was probably the best publication I have ever had in my career. It drew more attention, phone calls, radio interviews, and just plain good fun than anything I had ever published before.

The baby and Mum were whisked off to the Rotunda Hospital the next morning, when the boat finally docked. The mother was a refugee heading for Ireland, and I wonder now, if the baby, having been born on the Irish sea on an Irish ferry, would qualify for Irish citizenship? I have been over and back to Ireland a few times since then, but I can tell you I have flown every time.

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